

THEATER REVIEW

Hemingway Papafest for Paul Newman Charity

By BRUCE WEBER

Talk about Americana. At Avery Fisher Hall on Monday night 2,800 people sang "The Star-Spangled Banner" together, the orchestra played an overture with the red-white-and-blue chords of Aaron Copland, the movie stars came out — Paul Newman! Julia Roberts! — and then the play began, a kind of ur-text for the 20th-century American coming-of-age story. For men anyway. It was Ernest Hemingway, after all.

"The World of Nick Adams," an adaptation by A. E. Hotchner of several of Hemingway's early autobiographical stories, was dramatized on television in 1957 with a Copland score, but until this week it hadn't been seen since. The script, missing for decades, was discovered earlier this year amid Copland's papers in the Library of Congress, and Mr. Hotchner did some work on it to make it into a kind of concert piece. This is what was performed on Monday in grandiose fashion, with a 29-piece chamber ensemble (the Orchestra of St. Luke's) conducted by Leonard Slatkin and a cast aglitter with celebrity.

The occasion was a benefit for the Association of Hole in the Wall Gang Camps, a charitable organization founded by Mr. Newman and Mr. Hotchner that has built and runs five free camps for children with life-threatening diseases in the United States and Europe, with three more under construction (including one on the border of Jordan and Israel).

A dozen or so of those children were present on Monday night. They were paraded out at the end of the evening and sang a thank-you song to the audience members who had paid up to \$2,500 a ticket, a grown-up orchestrated display that smacked a little of dog-and-pony exploitation. Nonetheless the evening was expected to raise more than \$1 million, and the children seemed poised and genuinely grateful, not to mention delighted to be embraced by the stars who took part in the evening's presentation. As Mallory Cyr, a 16-year-old camper from Connecticut, who, along with her sister, Maisy, 8, suffers from a rare blood ailment, remarked from the stage: "It's like they stepped off a movie screen just for us. Thank you, thank you, thank you."

The cause seems a popular one in Hollywood; even by benefit standards, the program was unusu-



Steve J. Sherman

Paul Newman, left, and Matt Damon dramatize Hemingway.

ally starry. In addition to Mr. Newman and Ms. Roberts, the actors were Matt Damon in the title role, Gwyneth Paltrow, Meryl Streep, Morgan Freeman, Alec Baldwin, Kevin Kline, Joanne Woodward, Brian Dennehy, Danny Aiello, Philip Seymour Hoffman and James Naughton.

Some of the actors arrived in New York just a few hours before the show, so the director, Frank Corsaro, had little time for rehearsal, and the performers read their lines from the scripts.

"These things can turn out to be great evenings or great disasters," Mr. Hotchner said (accurately) in an interview beforehand.

But happily the audience, either star-struck or borrowing from the good will of the occasion (probably some of both), was not only understanding but exuberantly appreciative. The first standing ovation of the night occurred at their first glimpse of the stars, before the first line was delivered. And the biggest laugh was for a bit of dialogue between Ms. Streep and Ms. Roberts, who, playing drunken prostitutes in a railroad station from the story "The Light of the World," were both apparently confronting their lines for the first time.

"How can you say that?" Ms. Streep challenged Ms. Roberts at one point. Prepared to respond, Ms. Roberts looked down at the script.

"Um," she said, and then, with a comic flourish, turned the page. The stories themselves have been linked by Mr. Hotchner in ingenious fashion. Hemingway wrote 30 or so stories featuring

The stars turn out for a one-night staged reading.

Nick Adams, his young alter ego, many of them dealing with moments of emerging maturity, when a boy does a manly thing for the first time.

Mr. Hotchner has selected a handful of them, plucked from Hemingway's first three story collections — "In Our Time," "Men Without Women" and "Winner Take Nothing" — beginning and ending with "Now I Lay Me," a story drawn from Hemingway's experience as a wartime ambu-

lance driver in Italy.

In it Nick has trouble sleeping and looks back over his life; in Mr. Hotchner's adaptation, what he looks back on are the episodes told in other stories, among them the breakup of a romance ("The End of Something"), an encounter with hired guns in a small-town diner ("The Killers") and, after being thrown off a freight train, a meeting around a campfire with an addled ex-prizefighter ("The Battler").

Mr. Hotchner's script doesn't quite manage to keep out the sentimentality that Hemingway worked to avoid, and he adds more than a few clichés. (To name a small one, when Nick breaks up with his girlfriend, Marjorie — it's a painfully brief story, wrenching in what the characters refuse to say or can't say to each other — Mr. Hotchner adds considerable dialogue, including this line from Nick: "It's not you. It's me.") He has invented whole scenes for Hemingway's mother and father and, particularly in the narration (read by Mr. Naughton), some reflections on the writing life.

Still, with the help of the people onstage, the spirit of Hemingway, his fondness for the subject of a young man's education in manliness, shone through. Mr. Damon did a particularly nice job in this respect, maintaining the affectless quality in his line readings that Hemingway always strove for in his sentences. His scene with Ms. Paltrow as Marjorie was surprisingly touching.

Other moments of note included Mr. Aiello and Mr. Kline bringing an ominous comic timing to the long-coated hit men of "The Killers"; the burly Mr. Dennehy, wearing a white beard and looking like Papa himself, giving young Nick a